

A Flash of Vesak Thinking

Conditions That Arrest Social Decay - Aparihaniya Dhamma

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This is the glorious month of Vaisakha or Vesak in the Buddhist calendar during which we are told that most of the notable events in the life of Buddha Gotama - his birth, enlightenment and final passing away - took place. Quarrel not [neither Buddhists nor non-Buddhists] as to whether it is history or legend. You will please do well to leave it alone. What really matters to us is one's association with these events in the life of the Master and their being clustered together in the one single month of May. Are we mentally prepared for it today? This is evidently a time-related reckoning. The other equally precious place-related reckoning connected with the Buddha life, takes us to four places in north India [mind you there being no such Buddhist shrine anywhere in peninsular India]. These are called places evoking religious emotions or *saṃvejanīyaṭṭhāna*. They are Lumbini [birth], Bodh Gaya [enlightenment], Benares [first preaching] and Kushi Nagar [passing away].

It is claimed that Siddhartha, the Buddha aspirant, was born on the day of the Vaisakha full moon. Thirty-five such moons had to slowly roll along thereafter and steadily pass by, hopefully looking forward to his enlightenment. The last years of these saw moments of 'hope differed' when Siddhartha had, painfully though [*nibbija*], to take leave of his erstwhile teachers [Ālāra and Uddaka], who could not adequately meet his spiritual demands for release from the ills of the prolonging cycle of births and deaths. It was equally frustrating when he had, after six long years, to unhesitatingly declare that the road to enlightenment lay, well and truly, in another direction [*añño maggo bodhāyā 'ti*]. This is where he left behind his five comrades, Kondañña and others and rightly pursued his

journey still further, all by himself.

It is after these vital incidents of self-correction, and believe it or not, by no divine assignment, that *Samaṇa Gotama* the man rose from the stature of ordinary mortal to that of immortally divine *Sammā Sambuddha*. Little wonder then that the Mahāyānists of the later centuries elevated him to the pre-eminence of Buddha of Infinite Light and Infinite Life [*Amitābhah* and *Amitāyuh*]. And toady at international levels, both the Mahāyānists and the Vajrayānists call with pride this *Samaṇa Gotama* **Shakyamuni the Eternal Buddha**. This very natural global elevation to eternity through time and space of our down-to-earth Buddha Gotama, we believe, is a far greater tribute and a conferment of honour than his being made a regular consumer of mortal food and drinks in the assemblies of his contemporary disciples.

During this entire month of Vesak, let us with honest undivided devotion glorify the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha and at the same time endeavour to elevate spiritually the quality of life, both at the level of the home and of the state. Whatever political theorists say we cannot turn our back on the fact that for more than twenty-three centuries Buddhism has remained the mainstay of nearly seventy percent of people in this country. Foreigners who have witnessed this hundreds of years ago have left behind astonishing records.

We know what opium, plain and simple, is supposed to have done in ancient China. We have personally witnessed in the sixties and seventies of this century, even in the universities in North America, what drugs like LSD, hashish and marijuana were doing to the youth. But today, more and more political drug peddling goes on, i.e. experts deliberately keep on distorting the basic value systems of a country and of a people, to have more people conform to current trends. For whatever reason these are undertaken, with the young and the old, in the home and the school, they must necessarily boomerang.

During this sacred and solemn season, please take serious note of this kind

of malaise which has been overrunning our country now for more than two or three decades. Surely you know it is not one of today or yesterday. Believe it that we are plagued and cancerous. We need no medical clinics in the big power countries abroad to know this. Everyone of us, from the very top to the very bottom, man or woman, must set apart a few days for regular reckoning as to what we are and what we do, right now. This is the kind of therapeutic meditation we recommend. Not today's trendy and glamorous meditation which leads to levitation and other supersonic flights. This is essentially in the interests of our families and the communities to which we belong as well as of the state which is our own life and not that of the rulers who sometimes over invest therein. The state cannot be allowed to go pathological. It certainly needs at times diagnosis and medication, but certainly in the hands of those who can prescribe. If we fail in this, none of us shall ever rule successfully or ever be successfully ruled.

Herein we wish to seek a solution to these problems in our own religious and cultural moorings. If we struggle, each one in turn, to establish the religious identity of our family lines merely to consolidate our political image and political power and look elsewhere as we sit down to our task as policy makers, are we honest to ourselves. Let us openly admit as to where we derive our inspiration from, from generous offers received from interested parties elsewhere or from cheap purchases we have ourselves made.

Admitting as we do that we are not in the best of health right now, our memories go back to Buddhist teachings where we are reminded of such instances of failure and collapse within states and kingdoms. In these cases, the people concerned, i.e. the rulers of the land, by whatever name they go as kings etc., are strongly advised to turn in the direction of their more stable religious and cultural values in their search for solutions. These instructions are expressed in no uncertain terms. The rulers are required to go to the responsible men of religion who stand on very firm grounds of ethical and spiritual perfection. They are to be questioned with regard to correctness and propriety of action, and more

wholesome patterns of government to be pursued. Rulers must detect and discover their shortcomings and correct themselves in terms of advice received from those religious men of greater piety, for they are expected to determine the correctness of behaviour of those who govern. Not merely endorse what the rulers do by show of hands. That is the key to success in nobly carried out statecraft.

For details of this, please go to Cakkavattisihanada Sutta [No. XXVI of the Digha Nikaya at DN. III. 58ff.]. It is a must for the politically conscious Sri Lankans of today. Fortunately for you, the Sinhala translation of this sutta in the Buddha Jayanti Text Series is both correct enough and clear enough for acceptance. On the other hand, it is very unfortunate that its English translation by T.W.Rhys Davids in the Sacred Books of the Buddhists [SBB. Vol. IV. Dialogues of the Buddha III. p.62 of 1921 / 1957 editions] is disastrously incorrect. It expresses an idea very opposite to what is said in the sutta. For seventy-six years it has remained unchallenged, including forty years in its 1957 reprint, without any comments or correction from any source. How calamitous. The erroneous English translation requires the rulers to correct and put in order those self-correcting good monks. Is this somebody's wishful thinking. We believe Rhys Davids was well above that. We are willing to concede that this is a bona fide misunderstanding on the part of pioneers more than seventy-five years ago. But the worse tragedy is that Maurice Walshe in his new translation of the Digha Nikaya under the new name of Thus Have I Heard does not even detect this very gross mistake and himself perpetuates the howler [1995 p.397]. The best known scholar monks of this country have offered the book their highest commendation. Now it reappears in 1996 [unrevised] in a glamorous reprint. But readers beware.

Our conscious and deliberate attempt here today is to bring to light the universal and eternal relevance of the Buddha word with regard to most matters relating to human affairs: life in the home, government of the country etc. This

particular quote we are discussing today refers to sensible philanthropic good government and how best to set about it. The world today knows of diverse exquisite forms of governments. Buddhist texts reveal what makes it different from a system of high-handed government. This is government based on Dhamma. Dhamma has to be more than skin deep. More fundamental than official offers of pirikaras on special occasions and at state functions. Both those who give and those who receive have to be aware of this.

Let us now briefly take up this one small segment of conditions that arrest social decay or *aparihāniyā dhammā* as they are offered to us in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta [DN. II. 72 ff.]. These seven conditions are included under advice given by the Buddha to the republicans of Vajji as to how they could run their governments with stability and all round success with regard to social and communal coherence, economic development etc. There is no debating that they pertain to old world communities of ancient India. We are aware of it ourselves. Nevertheless, they contain sufficient wisdom for the deliberation of people in the modern world. Study of new subjects or segments of new subjects in the newer universities of the world need not drive us to turn our back on what is respectably our own. We do not need to go into details of these severally.

They could be grouped as:

1. Unity and agreement among peoples of diverse aptitudes and temperaments within a country. The emphasis, we believe, is on not exploiting the differences. They stress the need to avoid secret pacts, of those alone who are in alignment, shutting out craftily those who oppose and disagree. Regular get-togethers are emphasised - *abhiñham sannipātā sannipātabahulā*. Unity and unanimity at these meetings are equally important, both before sitting down together and before winding up the concluding sessions. It is also insisted on that they transact all their state affairs in total unity [*samaggā vajjikaraṇīyāni karonti*]. Perhaps they considered it an ideal worth

striving for.

2. They would handle with great caution changes or revisions to their constitutions or their legal set ups [*apaññattaṃ na paññāpessanti paññattaṃ na samucchindissanti yathāpaññatte porāṇe vajjidhamme samādāya vattantī ' ti. D. II. 74*]. Coupled with this also was their respect for the elders of their community and their opinions [*Ye te vajjīnaṃ vajjimahallakā te sakkaronti garukaronti mānenti pūjenti tesañ ca sotabbaṃ maññanti. loc.cit.*]. They perhaps were, appearing conservative though, eager to uphold their cultural continuity, respecting more their own tested versions than take hasty quick turns towards glamorous imports. Apparently they were not getting caught up at that time in the information highway or getting sandwiched, with evident pressure at international forums. It is mostly at these that new or newer nations are forced to give up their own cultural heritage, or they do so on their own seeking. Perhaps to those ancients, personal identity was as vital as peaceful co-existence.
3. They held their females in the highest esteem, well before feminist activists were sighted on the scene. 4. They also reflected a very high sense of religious tolerance and religious respectability, expecting apparently from each religious community its own contribution towards a total build up. This obviously was the mood of the pre-religious-fanatic groups of the Buddha's day.

If anything in religion can or needs to be revived or resurfaced under the name of fundamentalism, we feel that it should be, as far as Buddhists are concerned, only in areas where a healthy and robust contribution could be made for the total uplift of humanity as a whole, no more no less. Clumsy and burdensome trappings of any religion, we believe, could and should be laid by the wayside. Religion should not and justifiably could not be used to harass or

crush any section of men and women of this world in the name of any super powers above. This is the way we are made to think as Buddhists and we lay our cards on the table for everybody's scrutiny and possibly for mutual benefit.

May all beings be well and happy. May there be peace on earth and good will among men.

